

HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2005

Charge and Membership

The Amherst Historical Commission is a standing committee of the Town of Amherst, created by the Town Meeting in October 1972. The seven Commission members are volunteer citizens appointed by the Select Board for three years terms. Under M.G.L. Ch.40, sec. 8D, the Historical Commission is responsible “for the preservation, protection and development of the historical or archeological assets” of the Town of Amherst. Current members of the Commission are:

Gai Carpenter	term expires 2008
Edith Nye MacMullen, chair	term expires 2007
Paul F. Norton	term expires 2006
Caroline Olson	term expires 2006
Jean Thompson, clerk	term expires 2006
James Wald, vice-chair	term expires 2008

Currently there is one vacancy on the Commission.

Ms. Thompson served as the Chair of the West Cemetery Mural Subcommittee and continues as the Chair of the Subcommittee for the West Cemetery Improvements. Ms. Carpenter serves as Chair of the Publications Subcommittee. Mr. Wald is the Commission representative on the Town’s Comprehensive Planning Committee; Ms. Olson served as the Commission representative on the Community Preservation Act Committee; Ms. MacMullen is the Commission representative on the 250th Anniversary Celebrations Committee. Mr. Alex Kent has served as the Commission non-member liaison with the Design Review Board, although that position is now vacant.

The Commission is ably staffed by Jonathan Tucker, the Amherst Interim Planning Director.

Plans, Projects, Accomplishments

West Cemetery Preservation

All of the activities under this topic have been undertaken following the comprehensive 1999 West Cemetery Preservation Plan, which includes plans for restoring headstones, improving the entrances and structures such as the Town Tomb, installing lighting and informative signs, improving the walkways and landscaping. The Commission has adopted a schedule for annual requests for CPA and other funds to implement the plan.

The preservation and restoration of this, Amherst’s oldest cemetery, has been the focus of the Commission’s activity for nearly a decade. The highlight of this year was the near-completion and dedication of the West Cemetery Mural. The mural, which was made possible by the generous donations of the Amherst community and the tireless efforts of the chair of the Mural Subcommittee, Ms. Thompson, has been executed by David Fichter, assisted by a number of volunteers. The dedication on June 16th featured the New Black Eagle Jazz Band, who performed in honor of Robert Gilbert (“Gil”) Roberts, important jazz musician and one of the

scores of Amherst citizens featured in the mural. The ceremony was attended by over 300 residents of Amherst, a truly community event. The mural will be completed in late September.

The restoration of the headstones in the cemetery is the next priority of the Commission. CPA funding was voted by the Town Meeting and bids sought for the restoration of the stones in the oldest (1730-1830) section of the Cemetery.

The Cemetery Subcommittee began work on improving the lighting and signs for the Cemetery, both welcome and interpretative, with CPA moneys approved by Town Meeting.

It should be noted that the Commission is not unaware of the crying needs of the other Town cemeteries, the North and South ones. Plans for the painting of the fence of the North Cemetery have been initiated, and the work will be undertaken in the next year. Survey work for the improvement of the South Cemetery will be a focus of the Commission work next year.

Complete financial records of the Commission's expenditures, from CPA and private sources, are available at the Town Hall.

Amherst Preservation Plan

The Commission continued to work, with consultants Martha Lyons and William Geizentanner, on the development of a comprehensive historic preservation plan for Amherst and adopted the Amherst Preservation Plan in April. The Plan provides an orderly and prioritized sequence for the next ten years of the Commission's activity. Goals are identified under four categories: Physical Preservation Actions, Documentation Actions, Regulatory Actions, and Outreach and Advocacy Actions; the time-line ranges from Immediate Efforts (one to three years) to Long Range Efforts (seven to ten years.) The Plan presents an ambitious agenda for the Commission, but its specificity clarifies the goals and will aid in the Commission's decision-making process in the coming years.

Copies of the complete Preservation Plan are available in the Jones Library and for purchase at Town Hall.

Demolition Delay Review

Under Article 13, Demolition Delay, of the Amherst Zoning Bylaw, the Commission reviews and may hold a public hearing on the proposed demolition of any structure in Amherst. If the Commission sees a possible historical impact of the proposed demolition, it must hold a public hearing; if, following the hearing, the Commission finds that the structure is of significance, according to the criteria established in the Zoning Bylaw, it may impose a 6-month delay on the demolition to allow the parties to explore alternatives.

There has been a significant increase in demolition applications, from 5 in the preceding year to 14 in FY 05. Twelve applications, mostly for the demolition of mid 1900's minor structures, were approved, often without a hearing. Two demolition delays of six months were imposed after a public hearing, one at 26 Spring Street of an 1870 Gothic Revival house, the other at 846 East Pleasant Street of a pre-1815 brick Federal house. In both cases discussions are ongoing in efforts to save the important structures.

A complete list of the properties considered is available at the Planning Department at the Town Hall.

Because of the increase in the number of applications and given indications that such an increase will not prove to be an anomaly, the Commission is planning to propose to Town Meeting an amendment to the Zoning Bylaw which would allow the imposition of a 12-month delay period. The Commission feels strongly that many historical structures in the Town may be in jeopardy; accordingly, the Commission is considering applying for individual National Register status for certain historic buildings and intends to seek an extension of the East Village National Historic District.

Advisory Reviews

The Historical Commission has no formal role in the permit process other than the demolition delay review outlined above. However, its advisory review is often sought either by another Town board or committee or by the applicants seeking to make changes in historic buildings. Once again, this aspect of the Commission's work has seen a significant increase, from four reviews last year to eight this year. In most cases, the Commission voted to approve the proposed project with conditions or requests for alterations; one proposal, for on-street parking alterations on 214-218 Main Street, was not approved.

A complete list of the requests and actions taken is available in the Planning Department at Town Hall.

Community Preservation Act

The Commission has developed a Five-Year Historic Preservation Budget, which serves both as a guide for Commission deliberations and for its proposals to the Community Preservation Act Committee. The budget plan identifies the ongoing historical preservation priorities of the Commission and is a guide which may be amended as new challenges arrive. Four categories are identified: Capital Projects, Interpretation and Outreach, Research and Planning, and Annual Set-aside.

In preparing its annual requests, the Commission, in several cases, worked in collaboration with other Town entities or personnel, such as the Town Clerk, Inspection Services, and the Curator of Special Collections at the Jones Library. The Commission also determined that in some cases its proposals were to support analysis and design, not capital expenditures which were properly the responsibility of another body, public or private, and should be so funded. The following were the Commission requests, all approved by the Town Meeting:

West Cemetery Headstone Restoration:	\$150,000
Archival Materials Conservation and Restoration:	\$20,000
Town Hall Masonry Survey:	\$50,000
Emily Dickinson Museum Landscape Design Study:	\$15,000
Interpretative Publication:	\$7,500

Publications

The Commission has identified outreach activities and publications as vital functions in raising public awareness of the Town's history and in providing a service to the many visitors to Amherst. One publication, a guide to the Amherst West Cemetery Mural, which identifies and gives biographical information about the individuals in the mural, was completed and is available at the mural site and in various Town locations. Another, a detailed guide to the Dickinson National Historic Register District which focuses on the architecture of the buildings in the District and their former residents, has been completed by Paul Norton, Commission member and architectural historian. Publication is scheduled for October 2005.

Lecture Series

In collaboration with the Amherst Historical Society, and pursuant to the Commission's intent to seek cooperative ventures with other Town groups, the Commission introduced a monthly lecture series which was well attended; lectures were held alternately at the Town Hall and at the Strong House. The series began with a talk on the history of Town Hall by Charles Clem and included talks on the West Cemetery and the Dickinsons (Polly Longworth), the Amherst Commons (Jonathan Tucker), Slavery in Our Neighborhood (Robert Romer) and Abolitionism in Amherst (Bruce Laurie), William Smith Clark (Ruth Owen Jones), and outstanding trees of Amherst (Diane Gray). The series will resume in the fall.

Preservation Awards

One of the most gratifying of the Commission's duties is the selection and presentation of the annual Preservation Awards. Three awards were made:

Christopher A. Tarr, for the restoration of the Old North Fire Station, built in 1902 and in service until 1975.

Amherst College Trustees, for the preservation, during the renovations, of the South College (1821) and North College (1823).

Florence Savings Bank and Cumberland Farms, for landscape improvements which significantly enhance the appearance of the College Street and South East Street intersection, the site of the original East Village Common, Amherst's oldest and original village center.

In summary, the Historical Commission has completed a busy and fruitful year but does not intend to rest on any laurels; significant work lies ahead as we begin to implement the goals laid out in the Preservation Plan. We are grateful for the support we receive from the annual Town Meeting, the Select Board, the staff at Town Hall, especially Jonathan Tucker, and from the citizens of Amherst. We encourage participation, whether through attendance at our meetings or following our activities through the Town website or by contacting any of the members of the Commission.

Respectfully submitted,

Edith Nye MacMullen, chair